



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Miracle shmira

Citation for published version:

Harris, M 2014, Miracle shmira: David Hume versus the early Jewish rabbis. in L Hickman (ed.), *Chance or Providence? : Religious Perspectives on Divine Action*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 121-129.
<<http://www.cambridgescholars.com/download/sample/61918>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Chance or Providence?

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Harris, M. (2014). Miracle shmira: David Hume versus the early Jewish rabbis. In L. Hickman (Ed.), *Chance or Providence? : Religious Perspectives on Divine Action*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



CHAPTER 10

MIRACLE SHMIRACLE: DAVID HUME VERSUS THE EARLY JEWISH RABBIS

MARK HARRIS

The title of this chapter is inspired by an old Jewish joke.¹ A certain doctor is famed for his miraculous ability to cure arthritis. One day, his waiting room full, a little old lady, bent double over her walking stick, shuffles in slowly, waits her turn, and goes in to see the good doctor. Half an hour later she emerges, standing up straight, her head held high. The next person declares: “It’s a miracle, you walked in bent over, and now you’re standing tall. What did he do to you?” “Miracle, shm miracle,” says the old lady, “he gave me a longer stick.”

This joke encapsulates the somewhat tongue-in-cheek view of miracles that we find in some ancient Jewish sources such as the Babylonian Talmud. More than a thousand years before early modern science was revolutionising the laws of nature, leading to an inevitable worry about how these laws are compatible with belief in miracles, the Jewish rabbis of the early centuries of the Common Era (CE) were pondering the relationship between miracle and the laws of nature. In this chapter, I will discuss some ways in which this ancient form of Jewish wisdom relates to modern thinking on miracle, and especially to the definitive modernist perspective of David Hume. I will suggest that rabbinic thinking on miracle (which includes a significant degree of scepticism) can offer a helpful positive alternative to Hume’s much better-known scepticism.

We turn to describe Hume’s treatment of miracle first of all, and especially its relationship with laws of nature. Despite the importance of his empiricism overall, Hume’s treatment of miracle is often thought to be rather lacking in rigour. Keith Ward, for instance, declares that Hume’s arguments against miracles are “exceptionally poor...and they can be quickly disposed of” (Ward 2002, 742, 745). It is therefore interesting to

¹ <http://jewishhumor.blogspot.co.uk/2009/07/miracle-shmiracle.html>. Accessed on 3rd December 2013.

note that, in spite of such criticisms, Hume's definition of miracle is virtually ubiquitous, perhaps because it serves the equally ubiquitous modern meme that science and religion are totally opposed.

Hume's famous definition of miracle appears in Chapter X ('On Miracles') of his *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), and its most succinct statement in an Endnote: "A miracle may be accurately defined, *a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent*" ('On Miracles', X.12, Endnote). Note the juridical language here. A "transgression" is of course a wrongdoing, and Hume also uses the word "violation" ('On Miracles', X.12), both terms communicating the sense that a miracle involves a rigid framework being abused. This negativity gives rise to the first criticism that is often made of Hume's view, that it sets up a stratospherically-high view of the laws of nature, whereby they cannot be bypassed, adjusted, or overlooked, but can only be violently abused. The second criticism highlights the lack of coherence in Hume's use of the juridical metaphor of "law of nature". For in Hume's statement above, a miracle can only occur when the Deity (or an invisible agent, i.e. something beyond experience, and which is therefore supernatural) transgresses the laws. This means that the *lawmaker* and *lawenforcer* must also be the *lawbreaker*. Not only does this provide an incoherent picture of God, it also stretches the juridical metaphor of law of nature to its breaking point.

For that is exactly what Hume's definition makes use of: a very old metaphor, and far older than Hume himself. There has been some disagreement in historical studies of early modern science over how the transformation of the term "law of nature" came to pass, from the juridical and theological metaphor of antiquity (which linked the regularities of nature with the divine lawgiver), to the non-theological terminology of modern science (where the regularities, "laws", refer to causal, natural mechanisms; Henry 2004). However, it seems clear that in Hume's above definition of miracle he is harking back to the juridical/theological/metaphorical use of "law of nature", an idea that has an important biblical heritage, especially in the Hebrew Bible (Zilsel 1942, 247-8; Jaeger 2008), and which was familiar to Greek thinkers of antiquity such as the Stoics, as well as Patristic authors such as Basil and Augustine (Padgett 2003).

Moreover, Hume was not the first of the early modern thinkers to use the juridical/theological metaphor of a law being broken to define miracle—Robert Boyle, for instance, preceded him (Harrison 1995, 535)—but Hume's account is certainly the best known, perhaps on account of his withering scepticism, which more or less puts miracles out of court. And it

is this scepticism which provides the substance for Hume's next step in his discussion of 'On Miracles', as he proceeds to enthrone the laws of nature (and his empirical knowledge of them), on a nearly-unassailable pedestal. "A firm and unalterable experience has established these laws", he says, such as that "all men must die; that lead cannot, of itself, remain suspended in the air; that fire consumes wood, and is extinguished by water" ('On Miracles', X.12).

How "firm and unalterable" are these particular laws that Hume cites? Such is the onward march of science that we might question Hume at this point, or at least these examples, which appear less "firm" than Hume supposed. Lead can of itself remain suspended in the air (in a magnetic field, as a result of the Meissner effect, with a critical temperature for lead of 7.2 K). Moreover, there are types of fire which burn under water. As far as we know though, Hume was right when he said that "all men must die" (but it is worth noting that the mere existence of contemporary fields of interest such as artificial intelligence, transhumanism, and cryonics suggest that, whether they are realistic or not, technological solutions to human mortality are already under investigation). Therefore, an important lesson may be learned from Hume's premature rhetoric concerning these examples: science is in a state of constant flux; it is unwise to be too prescriptive about the laws of nature, since yesterday's miracle may be tomorrow's scientific law.

A further important question arises. Philosophers of science have, over the centuries since Hume, repeatedly asked whether the laws of nature are *prescriptive* or *descriptive* of nature, but no clear consensus has emerged. Answers have ranged from necessitarian accounts at one end of the spectrum, to instrumentalist accounts at the other, with intermediate positions also being advocated (such as the idea that the laws are basically statistical). Likewise, the related question of whether nature is deterministic or not has been met with no clear answer. While developments in twentieth century physics such as quantum mechanics and chaos theory have been held up as examples of *ontological* indeterminacy in nature, these same developments also submit to interpretations where the indeterminacy is *epistemological* rather than ontological. And science, while undoubtedly successful at describing potential laws of nature in empirical terms, lacks the competency to pronounce on their underlying basis. For this reason, scientific hypotheses made on the basis of one particular philosophical interpretation of the laws should be viewed with caution, since they stray into the territory of metaphysics. Such an example (although not without merit) is provided by the claims of many modern cosmologists, that these laws are so omnipotent and universal that they describe not just our

universe, but a whole ensemble of untestable universes (the multiverse). Of course, one of the reasons the multiverse hypothesis is invoked is to provide a non-theistic answer to the question of fine-tuning. In which case, a degree of Humean irony arises: although our understanding of the laws of nature—those that make the multiverse hypothesis meaningful and cogent—has expanded in scientific and mathematical terms far beyond what Hume might ever have dreamed of when he constructed his account of miracle, yet we have come full circle, since these laws are being used again to discount the possibility of divine action (fine tuning) by the invocation of many universes. Hume's high view of the laws of nature has effectively returned, again in order to make sceptical (but metaphysical) claims against theism. Arguably, such a move means that the old juridical/theological metaphor behind the term "law of nature" is making a comeback, but now in the opposite direction of the old metaphor, since it works *against* the existence of a divine lawgiver.

In light of this discussion, it would seem that the term "law of nature" is fraught with ambiguities, and that it might be time to search for an altogether-different terminology to describe the objectives of science. That may be the case, and Nancy Cartwright for one has argued (without reference to the theological difficulties) that we might be better off speaking of the "capacities" of nature rather than its laws (Cartwright 1999, 77). However, I would like to make a virtue of the old metaphor, in all its juridical and theological glory, at least when we speak of miracle. Furthermore, I would also like to retain something of Hume's robust scepticism. To see this, it is necessary to examine some ancient Jewish texts.

The phrase "law of nature" does not appear in the Bible as such, although there are related discussions of the scope and character of the natural world, sometimes linked with *torah*, divine law (Harris 2013, 83-6). Psalm 19, for instance, begins, "The heavens are telling the glory of God", moves on to describe the rising of the sun, and concludes with the resounding statement, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple" (v.7, NRSV). This passage raises an interesting theological question: does the constancy of the sunrise testify to God's law, or vice versa? Given that *torah* is understood as the entire framework of Israelite law—contained within, and embodied by the five books of Moses, and regulating concrete human affairs as much as the natural world—a case could be made for either view. At the very least we have here a theological view of that most celebrated of

all laws of nature, the rising of the sun. (Other examples may be compared: Job 28:26; Pss.33:4-9; 78:23; 107:25).

We might press these texts further to ask about a biblical view of miracle. This issue is complex, since, just as there is no phrase “law of nature”, so there is no word for “miracle” in biblical Hebrew or Greek either. We do, on the other hand, find terms like “sign” (e.g. Ex.4:17), or “great work” (2 Kings 8:4). A connection can be made between such signs, creation, and God’s law, as may be seen in a particularly revealing passage from the Wisdom of Solomon. Here, we find the Red Sea crossing described as an “incredible journey” (19:5), and a “marvellous wonder” (19:8). Significantly, we are told that the whole world needed to be re-fashioned according to God’s command, in order for the miracle to happen:

For the whole creation in its own kind was again formed anew, complying with your commands, so that your children might be kept unharmed (Wisdom 19:6).

Here, there is no sense that the Deity intervenes in the natural order, nor that the Deity transgresses a law of nature in order to part the sea; rather, God is said to completely *re-forge* creation, effectively giving new laws (“commands”) to the entire natural world. In this way, the miracle of the Sea becomes a stunning example of a “new creation” through a considerably more positive understanding of miracle than Hume’s, although it also invokes natural law.

Accordingly, the rabbis in the first few centuries CE went even further with this kind of thinking, declaring that the miracles of the exodus were pre-ordained at the *original* creation, laws of nature that only become apparent later on. So the miracles of the manna, and of Moses’ wonder-working staff were defined by the rabbis of the Mishnah to be part of the initial six days of creation described in Genesis 1 (mAbot 5:6). And as for the Red Sea crossing, it was taught that when God originally made the sea back in Genesis 1, God made it a condition upon the sea that it should part for Moses many years later (Ginzberg 2003, 553-555). Realising that such a law of creation must be truly universal, the rabbis explained that all bodies of water in heaven and on earth parted when Moses parted the Red Sea: whether the water was in caves, jugs, bowls or cups across the world, it all parted at the same time, emphasising that the miracle took place by means of a universal command to creation, a law of nature. Such was the enthusiasm of the rabbis for the universal consequences of this particular miracle, that they extended the story even further, to heighten the sense of the miraculous. For instance, they calculated that the walls of water through

which the Israelites walked were 1600 miles high, so that they could be seen by all of the nations on earth. One charming interpretation explained that, if an Israelite child was disturbed and cried during the passage through the water, its mother only had to reach out her hand into the nearby wall of water to pluck out an apple or some other piece of fruit to pacify the child (Ginzberg, 2003, 555-557)!

Of course, such readings are likely to sound absurdly fanciful to our modern Western ears. However, it is important to bear in mind here the Jewish tradition of interpretation known as *midrash*, which would often explore the significance and the difficulties of a given story by re-telling it imaginatively. (The modern technique of narrative theology is not so very different). And in these ancient Jewish readings of the story of the Sea crossing we find that there is an expansive (rather than a restrictive) understanding of the laws of nature, which allows for miracle to be defined as a *natural* affirmation of the *theology* of creation, rather than (as in Hume) a *theological* violation, intervention or incursion into *nature*. This is so because the rabbis operate within a related, but theologically more inclusive framework than Hume. Both operate with a *high* view of law. But while Hume, the great empiricist, defines the laws of nature in terms of his experience and the naturalistic evidence available to him, the rabbis define the laws of nature in terms of the theological evidence of *torah*, divine law. For Hume the laws of nature are to be understood as legal terms only metaphorically; for the rabbis, the laws of nature are to be understood as literal components of the divine law, and components which they, the rabbis adjudicate over.

For, lest it be thought that the rabbis lived in a kind of theological dream world compared with Hume's naturalistic scepticism, we should note that the rabbis were also capable of hard-headed scepticism. (It is suggested that this scepticism was in part a reaction to the Christian claims made about Jesus as a miracle worker; Corner 2005, 165-9). There can be no better illustration of rabbinic scepticism towards miracles than the classic Talmudic account of a legal dispute found in Baba Mezi'a 59b. Here, Rabbi Eliezer is so certain of his interpretation of the *halakhah* that he calls upon a nearby tree to prove him right against the other scholars gathered in opposition to him. The tree uproots itself and moves a hundred cubits, but his opponents are unimpressed. Rabbi Eliezer then calls upon a nearby stream to prove him right. The stream flows backwards, but again his opponents are unimpressed: "Water cannot prove anything," they say. Then Rabbi Eliezer calls upon the walls of the building to prove him right. Sure enough, the walls bend inwards, but they do not fall down completely, out of deference to one of the other scholars present, who has rebuked the walls.

Finally Rabbi Eliezer calls upon heaven to prove him right, and a heavenly voice booms out, “What have you got against Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that the *halakhah* agrees with him?” The opponents answer with amazing scepticism: “*Torah* was given to us from Sinai,” they say, “so we pay no attention to a heavenly voice.”

Again, this might appear to be an outlandish and fanciful story to modern Western ears, but it makes the highly relevant point for our purposes that divine jurisdiction on both law and miracle has been handed over to the earthly community. God may question, but only the earthly community may answer authoritatively. Now that *torah* has been entrusted to human hands, it is the earthly community that interprets and adjudicates, whether the matter concerns human, natural, or divine interests. Hence, even in the face of putative signs from heaven (miracles), there can be grounds for scepticism while the matter is still under discussion by the community. The power for any decision about the law—God’s law or a law of nature—rests with the community, and not with a sign from heaven, since all is *torah*, and all is in the community’s hands.

This, I suggest, is the ideal way to adopt Hume’s powerful but nihilistic scepticism. Hume’s “firm and unalterable experience” against miracles is vulnerable to the fact that it is his own individual view, informed neither by centuries of matured discussion of the scientific and philosophical bases of the laws of nature, nor by exposure to the community’s scrutiny. In connection, Polanyi explains that modern science as we know it is a communal activity: individual geniuses can make a difference, but ultimately it is the consensus of the scientific community that adjudicates (judges) over acceptable scientific ideas and results, and indeed even over what constitutes “science” (Polanyi 1958, 1962, 163-4, 216-7). From that point of view, the fabled objectivity that postmodernity insists is out of reach is very much within reach when it is the scientific community’s current consensus. Applying these ideas—mediated by Polanyi’s juridical understanding of the scientific community, but clearly operative in rabbinic discussion of miracles too—I would like to commend a community-based approach to miracles. This would be aided on the one hand by the rabbinic *high* theological view: the laws of nature are God’s laws commanded to nature within an inclusive theology of creation. But on the other hand, such a *high* theological view must be constantly subjected to a community-based scepticism. The power of miracle, I suggest, actually lies with the human communities of faith, and how they adjudicate divine law and natural law.

To summarise, I have explored Hume’s definition of miracle, and have pointed out some of the inconsistencies. Like many interpreters before me, I

have suggested that Hume's definition is vulnerable on account of his very "high" view of the laws of nature, a view which is difficult to sustain in light of contemporary philosophies of science. One of the most significant problems arises from the fact that Hume's definition works by reviving the old juridical/theological metaphor underlying the term "law of nature". By way of contrast with Hume, I have introduced early Jewish views which understand the laws of nature as literal expressions of divine *torah*. These views are able to incorporate miracle *naturally* within a universal and adaptive theology of creation. Canonical miracles of *torah* are enthusiastically affirmed in such a view, but all miracles are nevertheless subject to stringent deliberation (and if necessary, scepticism), by those in the community who have been accredited to judge over human and divine law. We find then that through the community of experts both "laws of nature" and miracles become juridical matters. Ready parallels may be drawn with Polanyi's idea of the modern scientific enterprise as a community exercising a juridical capacity over the results and scope of science: the "laws of nature". This comparison between the rabbinic community and the scientific community illustrates again that Hume's definition of miracle is inadequate to account for the complex and dynamic ways in which both miracle and laws of nature emerge. No easy definition of either is sufficient; rather, working understandings of both miracle and natural law materialise through robust scrutiny and even scepticism by the respective juridical communities.

Bibliography

- Cartwright, Nancy. 1999. *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Corner, Mark. 2005. *Signs of God: Miracles and their Interpretation*. Aldershot, Burlington (VT): Ashgate.
- Ginzberg, Louis. 2003. *Legends of the Jews. Volume One: Bible Times and Characters From the Creation to Moses in the Wilderness*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society.
- Harris, Mark. 2013. *The Nature of Creation: Examining the Bible and Science*. Durham: Acumen.
- Harrison, Peter. 1995. 'Newtonian Science, Miracles, and the Laws of Nature.' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56: 531-553.
- Henry, John. 2004. 'Metaphysics and the origins of modern science: Descartes and the importance of laws of nature.' *Early Science and Medicine* 9: 73-114.

- Hume, David. 2007. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Peter Millican. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jaeger, Lydia. 2008. 'The Idea of Law in Science and Religion.' *Science and Christian Belief* 20:133-146.
- Padgett, Alan G. 2003. 'The Roots of the Western Concept of the "Laws of Nature": From the Greeks to Newton.' *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55: 212-221.
- Polanyi, Michael. 1958, 1962. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Ward, Keith. 2002. 'Believing in miracles.' *Zygon* 37: 741-750.
- Zilsel, Edgar. 1942. 'The Genesis of the Concept of Physical Law.' *The Philosophical Review* 51: 245-279.